SEMINAR ON PROMOTING AN INDEPENDENT AND PLURALISTIC AFRICAN PRESS

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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear colleagues and friends,

First of all, I wish to express my personal delight in welcoming all of you here at Windhoek's Safari Hotel. I also wish to join the Assistant Director-General of UNESCO, our good friend Mr. Yushkiavitchus, in welcoming all of you to this unique seminar. We feel particularly privileged to have with us His Excellency the Prime Minister of Namibia, Hage G. Geingob. It was my privilege, exactly a year ago, to see Namibia, here in beautiful Windhoek, take its first steps as the youngest member of the community of nations. It is my privilege today to see Namibia becoming a model of freedom of expression and tolerance.

Communication of people's ideas between and within nations has accelerated over the last years. All over the world, regardless of political, cultural or economic circumstances, people are drawing inspiration from each other and asserting themselves in the concerns that directly touch their lives. A popular demand in one country becomes a new propelling force, an example to be emulated, in neighbouring or even distant countries, where people voice their desire for a greater share in the debate regarding the management of economic and social development, as well as a share in its benefits.

Never was information more crucial to democracy than it is today. Freedom of information and of expression, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is the touchstone of all other rights: it is the most fundamental right, a right which stands on its own. However, the exercise of this right requires practical experience and adequate professional training. Some groups around the world have had for a long time the experience of freedom of expression. Other groups acceded to this experience much later. But there are many who have never had a chance to experience this right. These groups were never exposed to an environment of independent and pluralistic media. With regard to the international debate on this issue, freedom of information and the existence of a pluralistic press, over many years, have appeared as values associated exclusively with the Western world, while their root, the right to freedom of expression, is indeed a universal value common to all humankind. The unprecedented historic changes going on in the world have given powerful expression to this, and have at the same time indicated the emergence of new requirements for media development and media diversification in many parts of the globe. The world is in the process of being transformed into an information society. It is my hope that this meeting of media practitioners, policy makers, media entrepreneurs, development experts and bankers will provide the impetus and inspiration to respond more expeditiously to Africa's information needs.

With the 1989 General Conference of UNESCO and the session of the United Nations Committee on Information held in 1990, the international community has moved away from a period of politicized debates into an era of practical action. The consensus achieved on the practical aspects of information allows us to move along two avenues. The first is to strengthen the different cultural identities of every nation through the development of their information infrastructures, whether public or private, and the second, to assure the free flow of information among and within all nations. The consensus reached in the debate on information was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in December

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of last year. It should also be noted that many countries are striving to strike a balance between openness to a free flow of ideas and the ineluctable desire to preserve cultural traditions and their sense of identity. These efforts can be observed in both developed and developing countries. But it is this consensus within the international community and the new strategy in the field of information and communication that have made this seminar possible.

Holding a seminar about practical steps to promote a pluralistic press in Africa, with its diversified social structures and political systems, poses the risk of undue generalization. However, in the field of communications there appears to be a common ground which reduces that risk. Many African communication practitioners and scholars have pointed to the centralized ownership and control of the largest portions of media facilities as a common feature of the region. The understanding that media are tools for nation-building has therefore made the professional journalist an intermediary between the State and its citizens. In the exercise of his or her professional obligations, the African journalist is often torn between loyalty to the general public, whose confidence he or she must maintain, and loyalty to sensitivities of the Government. The present debate in most African countries about their future and the role of the media is rooted in the social, political and economic crises that are currently sweeping through the continent. This debate focuses on concerns in many areas, one of which is the media.

Many communication experts, including African media practitioners, sociologists, anthropologists and policy makers, have dwelt extensively on the role of the media in fostering cultural identity and creativity. A majority of them recommended practical steps leading to democratization, decentralization and diversification of communication so as to provide opportunities for real and direct involvement of the people in the total process of social change in the world of today. The development of communication must be rooted, without any question, in the indigenous environment, culture and value system. At the United Nations, officials from developing countries have often expressed fears that foreign media, in the long run, would undermine the distinctiveness of their indigenous cultures and their national identities. External sources of information and entertainment, they maintain, would also influence domestic public opinion, thus negatively affecting the shape and the goal of development. As several speakers during the last session of the General Assembly pointed out, these external information sources tend to define problems and prescribe solutions out of context. But the question might be asked whether in the past these fears haven't been used also as a pretext to suppress a free flow of information. Isn't it also true that, with the same arguments, any external input whatsoever has been disparaged and even condemned? Isn't this the notion according to which African audiences are less capable of making a judgement of their own?

The participation of the private sector in the establishment of a pluralistic press is an essential element in the development process. At a time of socio-political changes world-wide, we see in an increasing number of African countries an emerging independent press struggling to find its space, not only in a difficult environment but also in the public mind. A better-informed citizen is a more efficient player in the economic development of his or her country. And this is the other meaning of an independent press. While the role of communications in the development process has been widely recognized, policy planners and administrators have turned their attention to other equally important aspects of national integration and cultural enhancement, thus avoiding the larger debate on freedom of expression and the promotion of a pluralistic press. But we all agree that if Africa is to reach a level of self-realization and self-reliance, one of the key ingredients in such a development effort is, unquestionably, the development of its information structure. Communication as a horizontal process provides a window of opportunity for members of the community to participate fully in the mutual debate on issues affecting the life of the country. If the argument holds

true that development is about people, then media development is an integral part of the same frame of thinking. In fact, participation by grass-roots actors is not only the answer, it is an imperative for media development in Africa and must be given highest priority. As the strengthening of traditional African values is defined in terms of endogenous cultural, political and economic variables, such participation requires having a voice in the media as well. An independent printed press is an important part of grass-roots participatory strategies. In light of the ongoing democratization process on the continent, the press must be ready to assume an active and responsible role in this regard. Grass-roots participation is essential for a media infrastructure which in the full sense of the word is able to reflect, to record and to interpret events at home, in the neighbouring country and beyond.

We commend the efforts of those countries and development agencies represented here who have contributed towards the development of novel communication projects in Africa. They have made considerable funds available and—in some cases—have made development in communication part of their legislative programmes. Their actions are in recognition of the fact that we live in an increasingly interdependent world of common needs and common concerns, and also that complex world problems which transcend national boundaries can only be solved effectively by peoples and nations acting in concert. It is also for this reason that Africa's communication potentials need to be enhanced.

The development challenge facing Africa is tremendous. There is no guarantee of early success, even in a cultural environment with a long tradition. The only guarantee I can provide is that the United Nations stands ready to bring together all those groups who are willing to strive for a new media environment geared to the emerging needs of information and communication in a changing world. It is not an equal world yet; there are disparities, and we at the United Nations are not only aware of them but are at the same time sparing no effort to reduce the imbalances at all levels. Independent news media have to play a role in these efforts.

The question has been asked what kind of results we expect from meeting here in Windhoek. This seminar is meant to be action-oriented. It should be the starting-point for a continuous dialogue by media practitioners, policy makers, entrepreneurs and editors—a dialogue that would be pursued further on a horizontal basis. The result of the seminar should be a catalogue of projects on which, in a collaborative effort, immediate action can be taken. We must bear in mind that there will be no real development without the development of the media, both public and private. A pluralistic communication infrastructure which includes independent media will become an important factor in sustainable development. But at the same time we should never forget that, as I said earlier, freedom of information and of expression is a fundamental human right, a right that stands on its own.

In conclusion, let me emphasize that the call for freedom of information found expression in one of the first resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly, adopted unanimously in 1946. This call has been voiced in all languages throughout the world ever since. It is important to recall that many people over the decades have died in standing up for that freedom. It is the right of every human being, in the exercise of his or her trade, not to risk his or her life every day for the sake of freedom of expression and freedom of information. The world is in transition, and those who champion freedom of information need our support. It is now that freedom of information and freedom of expression have a chance to become the prevailing component of our life in the world of the 1990s.

Permettez-moi, Mesdames et Messieurs, de terminer sur un ton un peu plus personnel et dans une langue qui est la mienne et que je partage fièrement avec beaucoup d'autres sur ce continent. Il existe aujuord'hui—pourquoi s'obstiner à le nier—un souffle puissant de la liberté qui secoue le monde entier et auquel n'échappe pas l'Afrique. Le moment n'est-il donc pas venu pour que

sagement, mais efficacement et avec résolution, le continent jette par-dessus bord les faux-fuyants du passé et ses arguments fallacieux et que les vaillants fils et filles de cette magnifique et antique Afrique reprennent à leur compte, haut et fort, le cri irrépressible de l'humanité en cette fin de siècle : ''Nous voulons être libres, nous voulons, nous aussi, Africains et Africaines, nous exprimer librement ?'' Est-il déraisonnable d'espérer qu'un tel cri, si pur, si digne et si noble, ne sera plus jamais, comme c'est encore malheureusement le cas, étouffé par les murs de la prison ou les menaces de tel ou tel service de sécurité de l'Etat ? Actions rétrogrades et anachroniques, sans le moindre doute, mais n'est-il pas avant tout de l'intérêt fondamental de l'Afrique de faire l'économie de la perte de telles précieuses richesses à un moment où les yeux du monde entier sont grands ouverts ?

Allow me, ladies and gentlemen, to conclude on a more personal note, and in a language that is my own and that I proudly share with many others on this continent. There is today—why should one try to deny it?—a powerful breath of freedom that is sweeping through the entire world, including Africa. Surely the time has come for the continent, acting wisely but effectively and with determination, to jettison the prevarications and fallacious arguments of the past, and as this century draws to a close, for the valiant sons and daughters of this magnificent, ancient Africa to take up the irrepressible cry of mankind, chanting out loud: ''We want to be free, we, men and women of Africa, we too want to express ourselves freely.'' Is it unreasonable to hope that this cry, so pure, so worthy and so noble, will nevermore—as is unfortunately still the case—be stifled by prison walls or threats from any State security service? These are retrogressive and anachronistic actions, without a doubt, but is it not first and foremost in the fundamental interest of Africa to halt the waste of such precious resources at a time when the eyes of the entire world are open wide?

May this seminar provide us with the much needed inspiration for action in strengthening a pluralistic information infrastructure on the African continent.

I wish us success in our efforts. Thank you very much.

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